

^ You agree to help the enigmatic fox, but can he really be trusted?

# Interactive

## Taru Taro Legends

We chat to the trio of international developers behind a browser-based platformer steeped in Japanese lore

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✓ Characters are drawn with pencil and paper before they're traced and refined in Illustrator.



A bit of advice for newcomers: if you're exploring *Taru Taro Legends*' leafy world for the first time, don't do what this hapless writer did, and plough on through the level without taking note of the axe sitting high up in a tree right at the beginning.

Without first climbing a bough and grabbing the weapon, you'll be defenceless against the barrage of flying insects, and pretty much guaranteed

to die within seconds. Grab the axe, and you discover that the game's world is an awful lot bigger – and friendlier to navigate – than it initially appears.

In fairness, browser-based platform adventure *Taru Taro Legends* is still at a relatively early stage of development, and designer Silvan Strübi is already thinking about making the axe a bit easier to spot in later builds. "I watch other people play in front of me as much as possible to see where they're having issues," Strübi says. "For example, most players miss the first weapon placed on the first branch, so we have to consider making it more obvious rather than mysterious."

**"Ninja Gaiden, Shinobi, Metal Slug, and Sonic the Hedgehog are all cited as influences"**

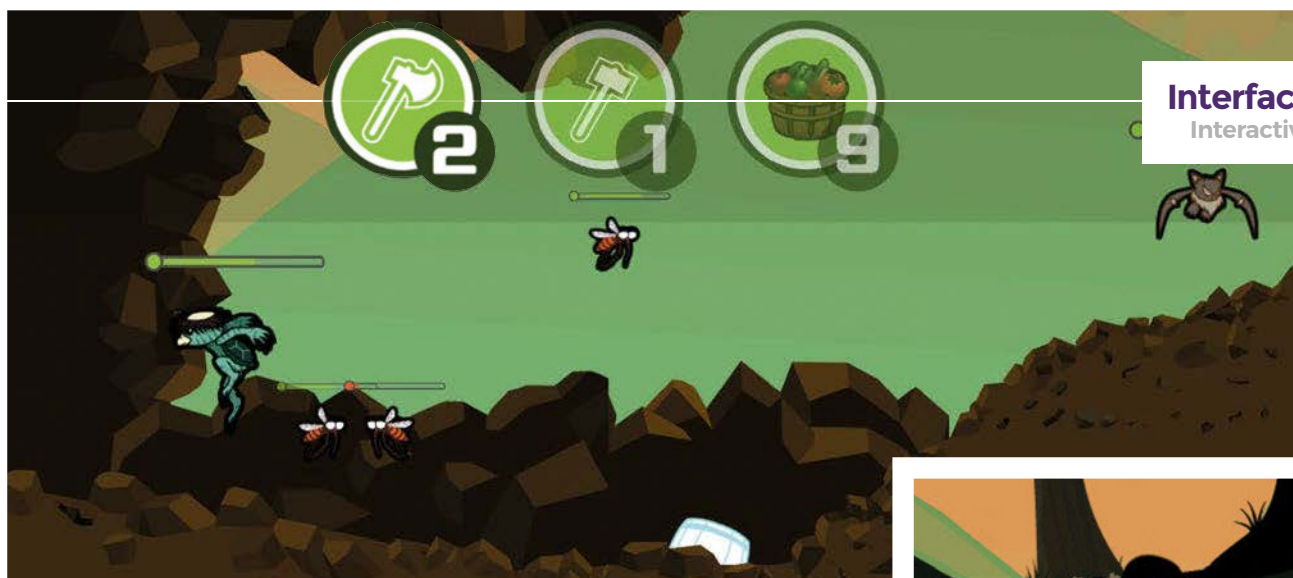
Axe placement aside, there are plenty of other mysteries left to uncover. As the game starts, its young hero Taro encounters a white fox, who's blindfolded and, thanks to some unknown curse, chained to an empty rice wine barrel. Determined to find his missing friends, Taro agrees to carry the barrel for the fox, and

sets off on his side-scrolling adventure.

"The origins and intentions of just who and what the fox is isn't known to the player at the start of

the game," Strübi says. "Since the fox needs Taro to carry the barrel, there's a 'who's-helping-who' element that might make players question the fox's motives."

So begins a free-roaming Metroidvania, where you explore the landscape in search of energy-reviving fruit and items you can use to progress. As you've probably gathered by now, *Taru Taro Legends* is steeped in Japanese culture, from the folklore that runs through its story and characters to the arcade games that inspire its action: *Ninja Gaiden*, *Shinobi*, *Metal Slug*, and *Sonic the Hedgehog* are all cited as influences. The small team behind *Taru Taro* are, however, properly global: Strübi once lived in



▲ The barrel Taro carries can also be used as a shield to protect him from enemy attacks.

Japan, but is now based in Switzerland; graphic artist Rubén Peña was born in the Dominican Republic and spent his formative years in the US before moving to Osaka; sound designer Troy R Manning is also an Osaka resident, but is originally from Canada. Together, the trio have spent the past three years or so creating their platform adventure in their spare time – or in “the hours between hours,” as Manning memorably puts it.

## DESIGN, DEVELOP, DRUM

Each member of the team is an expert in their respective fields – Strübi is a web developer by trade, Manning is a drummer and former hip-hop band member, while Peña’s a freelance designer and illustrator – but none have been involved in making a game before, and so *Taru Taro Legends*’ production has also proved to be something of a learning process. Says Strübi: “As this is our first attempt, we often stumble into uncharted territory, making mistakes, learning about game development and the tools we are using as we develop our game. Needless to say, the learning part is the most time-consuming.”

The team have also been careful to tailor the game not only to their skills, but also the resources they have to hand. “At the time we started, there was no Unity for Linux, and at the same time, my home PC was just too slow to run Windows,” Strübi explains. “That left me with HTML5 [game engine] Phaser as the framework. Also, HTML5 games run anywhere – we’re very happy that anybody with a medium-powered device can play our game in their browser.”

“I’ve had to pool every resource available to me,” Manning concurs. “The soundtrack was almost entirely produced on a 1993 Korg X3 workstation that was given to me by a friend who ran a studio in Osaka that went bankrupt. The fox’s voice is my neighbour, who just happens to have a cool Toshiro Mifune kind of voice. Taro’s voice is my five-year-old son.”

For the game’s bold, cartoon-like graphics, meanwhile, Peña sketches out his characters on paper before redrawing and animating them with Adobe Illustrator and Adobe Animate respectively. Mostly, though, *Taru Taro Legends* is developed using open-source software like Tiled – used to build its levels – and p2.js, a 2D physics library that gives the game some unexpected glimmers of realism. It’s possible, for example, to throw an axe straight up in the air to kill a flying enemy – but if you don’t get out of the way, you can easily be injured as the weapon comes tumbling back down to earth. This latter aspect is particularly important to Strübi: “[I like] games which have real-world physics, a sense of reality, or at least reality in their own logic. 2D games where enemies also get wounded by spikes and where enemies could kill each other.”

Work on *Taru Taro Legends* is still ongoing, but the team has big plans for it, whether it’s refining its levels and ironing out bugs, or coming up with new challenges and minigames; their goal is to enter the game in next year’s BitSummit – Japan’s huge annual games expo. Until then, you can freely explore its mystery-filled world for yourself at [tarutarolegends.com](http://tarutarolegends.com). Just remember: if you really must throw an axe in the air, be sure to get out of the way before it lands. 🦊



▲ Peña regularly shares his work-in-progress on Twitter. “It’s a good way to give the audience an in-depth look at how our game is made,” he says.

## SPOOKY UNDERPINNINGS

Among his inspirations, illustrator Rubén Peña cites *GeGeGe no Kitarō* as a reference point for *Taru Taro Legends*’ folklore and character designs. Beginning as a manga series created by Shigeru Mizuki in 1960, *GeGeGe no Kitarō* tells the surreal and often darkly funny tale of a lonely ghost boy – the Kitarō of the title – and his encounters with assorted ghouls and monsters. Widely credited with bringing traditional Japanese legends back into modern consciousness, the manga spawned an astonishing array of animated shows, movies, and video games. Without *Kitarō*, we probably wouldn’t have Level-5’s media-hopping franchise, *Yo-Kai Watch* – or, less memorably, the early NES game, *Ninja Kid*, which began life in Japan as a *GeGeGe no Kitarō* tie-in before its graphics were changed for its release in America.